

Composition as a Form of Musical Commentary in Guqin Tradition

‘A short note on Qin and composition’

New York Qin Society, 2024
sub-theme: **‘musical essay’**

André Ribeiro, vice-president

The guqin, an instrument steeped in millennia of Chinese cultural history, presents unique challenges and opportunities for modern musicians. Its repertoire, deeply rooted in a canon of classical works attributed to revered figures from antiquity, serves as both a foundation and a constitutive constraint for contemporary creativity. In this context, one must ask:

What defines a Qin composer today? How does guqin composition reflect its classical roots, and what does this mean for its practice today?

In my opinion, composition for the guqin can be understood as a form of musical commentary analogous to the tradition of philosophical commentary on Chinese classical texts. Rather than aiming for radical innovation, guqin composers engage in a dialogical process with the past, crafting new pieces that respond to, reinterpret or are inspired by historical works. This practice enriches the tradition, providing future generations with valuable insights and preserving the guqin's cultural resonance in a rapidly evolving world.

However, composing pieces that mirror the past is not necessarily an exercise in individual authorship. Instead, it emerges from a gradual and cumulative engagement with the repertoire, where experienced musicians, through extensive training, internalise gestures, fingerings, and hand positions. This deep familiarity with the instrument and its traditions fosters a nuanced understanding of musicality and sonic relationships, enabling

compositions that remain closely tied to the classical context while offering subtle reinterpretations.

A striking parallel can be found in the medieval European tradition of musical commentary, where composers appropriated and recontextualised earlier works, weaving their interpretations into the fabric of cultural memory. This approach mirrors the self-reflexivity inherent in guqin composition. An excellent example is the recent adaptation of *Chun Xiao Yin* (Spring Dawn Prelude) — presented by Jin Oh in the New York Qin Society event dedicated to Qin composition — which reimagines the piece while maintaining a profound connection to its historical essence.

This perspective challenges conventional notions of authorship. In the context of the guqin, the composer's originality is secondary to their role as a historical interpreter. The musician becomes a bridge between past and present, paying homage to the canon through sonic reimagining. This practice fosters a deeper understanding of the guqin's timeless qualities, allowing performers and composers to navigate the delicate balance between tradition and personal expression.

Moreover, Chinese musicians often refer to unique interpretative nuances as adding a “different flavour” to performances. This concept aligns closely with the Western notion of a distinctive musical style (see Charles Rosen, *The Classical Style: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven*, 1971). Yet, it raises questions about authorship: where does interpretation end, and where does composition begin? In guqin performance, this distinction is intentionally blurred, emphasising the relationship between performer and history rather than individual authorship.

Rethinking Creativity within Tradition

Guqin's composition, as a form of musical commentary, invites performers to engage in a reflective and dynamic dialogue with history. It is a practice of creating within constraints, where innovation arises not from departing from the tradition but from delving deeper into its established framework. By offering fresh interpretations and crafting new

works inspired by the canon, qin players contribute to the living tradition, ensuring its vitality and relevance for future generations.

This approach not only preserves the guqin's historical legacy but also reframes creativity as an act of continuity rather than rupture. In doing so, it opens new avenues for exploring the interplay between heritage and modernity, interpretation and authorship, tradition and innovation.

As the global community of Qin players continues to grow, these questions take on renewed importance. How can we honor the guqin's storied past while contributing meaningfully to its future? By viewing composition as a form of musical commentary, we can embrace the richness of this tradition, fostering a deeper connection between the past, the present, and the generations to come.

Further Thoughts: Decolonizing the Exotic: A New Perspective on Qin Composition.

We can undoubtedly explore various approaches to Qin music, including experimental, electroacoustic, and applied extended techniques. These ideas are welcomed by knowledgeable musicians who appreciate diverse musical experiences without prejudice. However, it is essential to distinguish these new compositions from the historical practice of Qin music, as they emerge from a different cross-cultural context.

In a Western framework, composition often seeks to universalize musical experiences into a singular, individual approach. This tendency, deeply rooted in colonial practices, has historically framed other cultures as objects of exploration, exoticizing their musical features. While contemporary composition has largely moved beyond such overt colonialist tendencies, a subtle "retro-colonization" persists in certain intercultural practices that treat non-Western musical traditions as mere sonic resources. This raises questions about the ethical dimensions of cross-cultural engagement in music and invites

reflection on how we, as qin players, can decolonize our understanding of musical creativity while preserving the authenticity of the guqin tradition.

André Ribeiro, November 19, 2024